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ONE way to get a handle on the weight and meaning of the resumption of nuclear testing is to note that Dwight D. Eisenhower had high hopes of getting a test-ban treaty signed in Paris in May 1960.

A summit had been arranged for that time. It came after the famous September 1959 visit of Nikita Khrushchev to the United States, during which the atmosphere in East-West relations had been warmed marvelously. The United States liked Khrushchev's ebullience and bluntness. He had come to think that he could do business with "Ike."

Ike himself hoped very much that he could put US-Soviet relations on a safer foundation before he left office. It was his last year in the White House. It was his last best chance to make a major contribution toward a more peaceful future for his country and for the world. He believed that if he could get a test-ban treaty signed in Paris, the road would be open to further peacemaking business with the Soviets.

Ike's high hopes for that spring summit in Paris came crashing down with an American U-2 "spy plane."

Ike had reluctantly agreed on another overflight of the Soviet Union for April. He had consented only on the absolute assurance by the CIA that if anything happened to the plane itself, "there was no fear of ever getting back a live pilot." May 1 was the last day authorized for launching the flight.

The CIA was mistaken. Francis Gary Powers was the pilot. The pilot bailed out, landing in Russia, near Sverdlovsk, alive and unharmed. He talked. What he said blew the CIA's "cover story" out of the sky (that it was only a weather reconnaissance plane that had lost its way).

Moscow's hawks were armed by the event. Mr. Khrushchev went to Paris and on May 16 blew up the conference. Ike never got the nuclear test-ban treaty. US-Soviet relations degenerated into the Cuban missile crisis and the downfall of Nikita Khrushchev. The deep freeze of the Brezhnev years followed.

None of this says that much difference is being made this week by the mere fact that President Reagan has decreed that the US continue underground nuclear testing — which was done on Saturday, March 22. The Russians were

not surprised. Mr. Reagan had long since refused to go along with an informal moratorium. He only did what he said he would do.

But a formal nuclear test ban is something Ike wanted in 1960. He regarded it as a sort of overture to more important and extensive arms-control agreements, a first step that would lead the way to others.

Mr. Reagan could have had a test ban this week.

The Russians have not tested a nuclear device since last August. On March 13 they announced that the moratorium would remain in effect until the next US test. Soviet diplomats informed members of Congress that Moscow would resume testing with the first US test after March 31. The United States tested on March 22. We await the next Soviet test.

More than 60 members of Congress urged the President to accept the moratorium. The administration declined. Its spokesman argued that development work aimed at a "Midgetman" nuclear missile requires testing. Another argument is that the Soviets got in all the tests they wanted just before they

broke off last August and that the US needs to do more testing to catch up.

There is no reason to think that US agreement to join in the moratorium would have made much difference in the steady development of new nuclear weapons in both countries. Testing or no testing, the development work will go on. But the Soviet proposal for an informal ban was a sort of litmus test of Washington attitude toward arms limitations.

No serious thought was given to the idea of the informal test ban. By inference, not much serious thought is being given to other forms of restraint on nuclear weapons.

There is a theory widely held among experts on the Soviet Union that Mikhail Gorbachev would probably be willing to do more in arms control right now than any of his predecessors since the Khrushchev era, and for the same reason: to be able to devote more Soviet resources to domestic economic recovery.

If so, a continuing test ban would have shown US interest in moving ahead. The treatment given the test-ban idea shows lack of interest.